

BROWNING: HIS TIMES, HIS ART, HIS PHILOSOPHY¹

I

BROWNING AND THE VICTORIAN AGE

MORE whimsically than accurately the topic of this talk on "Browning and the Victorian Age" recalls Dr. Johnson's comments on the seventy-second chapter of Niels Horrebow's *Natural History of Iceland*: the chapter is concerned with Snakes in Iceland, and the whole chapter contains only twelve words which state, in effect, that there are no snakes in Iceland.

It would be inaccurate to say that there is no "Victorianism" in Browning,—there is a great deal—but compared with Tennyson, Dickens, Ruskin, even Carlyle, Thackeray and George Eliot, the Victorianism in Browning is oblique, evasive, indirect, almost ineluctable; not obvious, patent, easily demonstrable as it is in Tennyson. When we are seeking the representative poet of the Victorian Age we turn to Tennyson rather than to Browning. Though Tennyson was somewhat of a recluse, and though Browning was a "man of the world", a "mixer", a most sociable person, mingling, after his wife's death and his temporary withdrawal from Italy, with all sorts and conditions of men and women in England, especially in London, it was Tennyson rather than Brown-

¹ A series of three public lectures delivered at the Rice Institute on March 10, 17, and 24, 1929, by Stockton Axson, Litt.D., L.H.D., LL.D., Professor of English Literature at the Rice Institute.

ing who fused in poetry most of the obvious things about which English men and women were talking: their politics, their social problems, their religious faith and misgivings, their every-day conceptions of what English people are, should be, or fail to be, their English patriotism and insularity. William Dean Howells said: "One need not question the greatness of Browning in owning the fact that the two poets of his day who pre-eminently voiced their generation were Tennyson and Longfellow; though Browning, like Emerson, is probably now more modern than either." "I suppose that at the time that he [Tennyson] wrote *Maud* he said more fully what the whole English-speaking race were then dimly longing to utter than any English poet who has ever lived."

Now, *Maud* was published simultaneously with Browning's *Men and Women*—both in 1855. Slowly, very slowly, the British public became aware that the author of *Men and Women* was a great poet, but the British public were aware, and for many years before the publication of *Maud* had been aware, that Tennyson was a great poet. Without animadversion on the intrinsic merit of Tennyson, it may be said, in one of his own lines, that Tennyson uttered "easy things to understand," things which most cultivated English people of his generation were thinking, but which were said by Tennyson with a felicity of phrasing surpassing all others. In short, Tennyson in the reign of Victoria, like Pope in the age of Anne and the Early Georges, could say better than anybody else the things that many were thinking. Browning, on the other hand, was perplexing most English people of his age, as the Apostle Paul (to whom Browning bore many resemblances) puzzled the fisherman apostle Peter with, as Peter writes, "some things hard to be understood." Tennyson spoke the language of his own time, Browning, the

language of a later time. Tennyson was a contemporary; Browning a progenitor. In short, Browning, like many another great man, was a generation or two ahead of his era. The world has now caught up with Browning; is it possible that the world has passed Tennyson?

Though the volume *Men and Women* was one of the books on which Browning's popular reputation was ultimately established, the fame did not come promptly. Twelve years after the book had been published (that is to say in 1867) Browning remarked, without bitterness (he was never bitter about his postponed popularity) that he was "the most unpopular poet that ever was."

Browning, like Coleridge and Carlyle before him, was read and understood in America while he was still a neglected, mystifying nonentity in Great Britain. When Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* was appearing in *Fraser's Magazine* and enraging readers and a few critics who deigned to notice it at all, the pieces of it (through the good offices of Emerson) were being collected in book form in America and thrilling intelligent American readers. One outraged British subscriber to *Fraser's* wrote in saying, "Stop that stuff [*Sartor Resartus*] or stop my paper." Another wrote, "When is that stupid series of articles by the crazy tailor going to end?" One of the few reviewers who noticed *Sartor Resartus* called it "a heap of clotted nonsense." But American readers soon saw that a new prophet and deliverer had uttered himself in *Sartor Resartus* under the fictitious name of Herr Professor Diogenes Teufelsdröck. The literary fame of Coleridge, Carlyle and Browning led John Nichol to write: "The leading critics of the New England have often been the first and best testers of the fresh products of the Old. . . . Ideas which filter slowly through English soil and abide for generations, flash over the electric atmosphere of

the West. Hence Coleridge, Carlyle and Browning were already accepted as prophets in Boston, while their own countrymen were still examining their credentials."

As late as the winter of 1859-60 Mrs. Browning wrote a long letter in which she said: "An English lady of rank, an acquaintance of ours, (observe that!) asked, the other day, the American minister, whether 'Robert was not an American.' The minister answered—'is it possible that *you* ask me this? Why, there is not so poor a village in the United States, where they would not tell you that Robert Browning was an Englishman, and that they were sorry he was not an American.' Very pretty of the American minister, was it not?—and literally true, besides." It may have been partly this early American appreciation of him which caused Browning later in life, when he was a widower, to go every week to the "at homes" of Mr. Phelps, the American minister to England under President Grover Cleveland (that was before we had an ambassador to England) and say to Mr. Phelps, "Please introduce me to some of your nice Americans." As in the case of Carlyle, Boston was the first center of enthusiasm in our country for a British writer whom Britain did not understand and for a long time did not appreciate; but rapidly the Browning cult spread all over America, and in the 1890's there were few towns in this land which did not have their Browning Clubs.

One of the most important of the early interpreters of Browning was Professor Hiram Corson of Cornell University, that picturesque old scholar who dressed like Tennyson and worshipped Browning. I used to be amused when I spent a halcyon week with Professor Corson at Atlantic City to observe his Tennysonian appearance, the long cape coat, the large black felt hat, the long beard, and then hear him say (he said it on an average of every hour and ten minutes),

"Tennyson had nothing to say that was pressing for utterance, but Browning—ah Browning!" The Browning craze has now ended so completely that a reviewer of one of the newest books on Browning says that anyone "would have been hounded out of literary circles for a hopeless fool" who would have "dared predict a quarter of a century ago that the time would come when there would no longer be a Browning cult, when the poet's philosophy would be as little talked about as Kant's or Plato's." This is quite true, and the reason for it is obvious, that Browning, like Kant and Plato, has come to stay. He is no longer a curiosity of literature, a philosophical freak, but rather one of the strong gods of philosophical poetry—secure, permanent. The novelty has worn off, and hence the excitement about him has abated. Carlyle says, "Let the sun rise twice, and it ceases to be wonderful." But the sun itself remains—and so does Browning. And the establishment of him in the firmament of literary-philosophical art began in America.

Since this lecture-essay was written there has been a renewed interest in Browning, stimulated by the play, "The Barretts of Wimpole Street," excellent in the reading, engrossing in the acting, as presented on the New York stage by Miss Cornell and a balanced cast of superior actors. This is not the place to discuss the authenticity of the playwright's Freudian interpretation of the angry tyranny and jealousy of Mr. Barrett, Senior, only to say that the actor cast for the thankless rôle carried it off to the admiration of packed houses, which appeared to distinguish between an actor's art and the abominations which he enacted. Miss Cornell looked and behaved as Elizabeth Barrett looked and behaved, delicate in health but unquenchable in spirit—at least after Robert Browning's first visit to her. The distinguished English actor who took the part of Browning was a joy—virile,

magnetic, overwhelming in his determination that Elizabeth shall marry him and go to Italy with him in spite of the jaundiced objections of her father, "a man whom I no longer believe to be sane," says Browning. Elizabeth's protests are unavailing. Browning sweeps everything before him with a will as impetuous as it is strong; "and I thought my father was the most domineering man in the world," says Elizabeth as she laughs and surrenders. The Robert Browning of the play was very much the Robert Browning of the biographies and the poems. It was a tribute to the reality of the actor's interpretation that a gentleman of unusual intelligence, but not deeply or widely read in Browning lore, said "I couldn't believe that that man was a poet," for this was precisely the reaction of most people who met the actual Browning. Tennyson had "poet" written all over him, but Browning gave no suggestion of the poet, in appearance or speech, rather the man of business.

This play, so extraordinary a popular success, has raised a new flurry in Browning enthusiasm. Whether or not it prognosticates a real Browning "revival" remains to be seen.

As late as 1868 (Browning being then fifty-six years old) the poet still believed that his own country, England, had declined to accept him, and wrote good-naturedly (he had too little vanity to be ill-natured because neglected) :

British Public, ye who like me not,
(God love you!)—whom I yet have labored for.

Those lines occur in Volume I of his magnum opus, *The Ring and the Book*. But, by the time he published the fourth and last volume of his masterpiece (in February 1869) he seems to have sensed a turn of the tide in his favor, for in the later volume he wrote

So, British Public, who may like me yet,
(Marry and amen!)

His instinct was correct, for the British public was beginning to wake up to a realization that the author of *The Ring and the Book*, of *Men and Women* (published fourteen years previously), and of many another volume of poetry dating away back to *Pauline* (published thirty-six years before—in 1833) was one of England's great poets; and in a few years was to hail him as one of England's foremost poets.

Browning himself had checked, practically halted, his own popularity by overloading much of his poetry with learning too erudite or philosophy too original and involved for the tastes of the Early Victorians. His second important poem, *Paracelsus*, published in 1835, when he was twenty-three years old, had attracted considerable attention from the discerning in England. It came in a "flat" period of English poetry—an eddy, a calm. The great early nineteenth century poetic epoch (the Wordsworth-Byron era) was ended—these earlier poets were either dead (like Coleridge, Scott, Byron, Shelley and Keats), or too old to write with fresh inspiration (Wordsworth and Southey). Tennyson had begun, and the discerning saw that in him a delicately accomplished artist had arrived—but whether the artist would ever discover anything important to say remained to be seen. In *Paracelsus* there was obviously a poet with a great deal to say, and he was saying it in an original and impressive manner. Professor Lounsbury is probably correct in his observation that "No volume of verse . . . was published during the fourth decade of the nineteenth century which created a profounder impression than did 'Paracelsus' upon"—the highly educated. John Forster in a review of the poem "without the slightest hesitation" (so he wrote) ranked the young author (barely twenty-three) with "the acknowledged poets of the age"—with "Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth." At a dinner of notables, including the venerable Wordsworth and Walter

Savage Landor, the host, Sergeant Talfourd, arose and proposed a toast—not to the great Wordsworth or to Landor, but to the young author of *Paracelsus*, and amid the amenities grave Wordsworth said in his slow north-country tones, "I am proud to drink your health, Mr. Browning," and Landor bowed low with his old-world courtesy, and also drank. It was a vivid night for the young poet. Quickly there followed friendships with many conspicuous literary people of London: Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle, Dickens, Miss Martineau, Miss Mitford; with prominent stage people such as Macready and Helen Faucit—and a host of others.

Then, as if deliberately, Browning set to work to nip his budding fame: by writing a series of plays that did not prove "playable," and by perpetrating such a baffling piece of obscurity as the long poem *Sordello*—a poem which with all its fascinations (and they are many) is still difficult reading. Sir Henry Jones, the philosopher-critic and Browning specialist, says only the truth when he compares its obscurities with *Sartor Resartus*, and writes: "The difficulties of *Sartor* have disappeared with the new times which Carlyle introduced; those of *Sordello* will stay so long as the mental structure of men remains the same." Jones agrees with the other historians and commentators that *Sordello* destroyed all chance of immediate popularity for Browning. If *Sordello* is difficult now for us who are familiar with Browning's habits of mind and art, his vast learning, introversions of speech, allusions, evasiveness, long parentheses, and all his other idiosyncrasies of matter and manner, including his strange combination of alternating prolixity and condensation, it is not remarkable that the Early Victorians, unaccustomed to his manner and methods, found the poem hopelessly unintelligible. Even the intellectually elect were baffled by it. It was to be a long time before the author of *Sordello*

could win popular favor from the Victorians, but he went doggedly his own way, saying that he had never proposed to write poetry as a substitute for a lazy man's after-dinner cigar or game of dominoes.

This apparent discrepancy between Browning and his age (the discrepancy is only apparent) was due to many things, among them: Browning's attitude toward the public, his attitude toward himself, his attitude toward his art, and his attitude toward what we now call "questions of the day"—the political, economic and social questions which absorbed so much of the thought of thinking people in the first decades of Queen Victoria's reign—the pregnant age of political, economic, industrial and social reform—questions which gave much of the character and color to the work of Tennyson, Ruskin, Dickens, Charles Reade, Charles Kingsley, Matthew Arnold and Mrs. Browning herself—but not Browning.

His attitude toward the public and himself may be dealt with in one category. Browning was so original in his thought and in his manner of expressing his thought that he needed an interpreter, and he declined to be his own interpreter. His attitude toward the public is matched for oddity by his attitude toward his own poems after he had completed them. If he had been, like Byron, scornful and perverse, we should say that he despised the public. But, instead, he was companionable, genial, friendly, hearty, sympathetic, overflowing with good fellowship and good will toward his fellow mortals, and with no grievance against his country and his fellow countrymen, in the manner of Byron. Nevertheless, he declined to meet the public on the public's terms; declined to persuade them to understand and like his poetry; declined to lead them gradually to his own mountain tops of thought, feeling and expression; they must climb for themselves without assistance from him. There was his poetry—people

could like it or leave it—Browning would not be exalted by their favor or vexed by their neglect. In one respect—in one only—Browning was like his *Andrea del Sarto*: Andrea, in the poem, tells his wife:

I, painting from myself and to myself,
Know what I do, am unmoved by men's blame
Or their praise either.

So it was with Browning: writing from himself and to himself he pursued his way serenely. Not even his poet-wife, between whom and himself there was such union of spirits as has made their marriage one of the idylls of literary history—not even she could intrude upon his creative moods.

Few literary societies have had better reason for existence than the Browning Societies—the parent society founded (without Browning's knowledge) by Dr. F. J. Furnivall and Miss Emily Hickey in London in 1881 (when Browning was sixty-nine years old), with offshoots all over England and America, and, of course, innumerable independent "Browning Clubs"; societies to study and explain that which Browning himself would not explain. Sometimes when Browning was requested to say what he meant in a designated passage, he would smilingly refer the questioner to the Browning Society. He had a similar attitude of aloofness toward his poetry—in marked contrast with Tennyson's coddling of *his* poetry. When the Browning Society discovered that Browning did not possess printed copies of at least some of his own poems, the Society presented to him a complete set of the *Works of Robert Browning* accompanied by a letter recommending them to his attention, as books which contained some good reading matter. Once a lady read to him some lines of poetry, and Browning "slapped his thigh [a characteristic gesture] and said, 'By Jove, that's fine'". He was enlightened and edified when the lady informed him that the author of the lines was one Robert Browning.

The most eccentric feature of all this is that Browning himself was not at all eccentric—on the contrary a normal sort of person—so normal that, as has been said already, many who met him for the first time found it difficult to believe that he was a poet: in dress and manner and conversation he seemed more like a banker or a prosperous merchant. Nevertheless, the fact remains that, after the select success of the early poem *Paracelsus*, Browning for more than thirty years lost favor instead of augmenting it by writing as he pleased instead of studying the public demand and striving to supply it. I do not know that any moral is to be drawn from this. Another and even greater poet, William Shakespeare, studied carefully the popular taste, and met it, and succeeded. But Shakespeare had to make a living by writing, while Robert Browning, a man of independent, moderately comfortable means, could afford to do what he pleased as he pleased to do it.

Not different from this was Browning's attitude toward his art. He wrote nine plays, but none of them has been a really popular success on the stage—notwithstanding extravagant claims to the contrary by some Browning enthusiasts who seem to mistake artistic success for stage success—the latter being a quite tangible thing, ascertainable by statistics of "runs" and box office receipts.

This raises the question which we must glance at later: why the most dramatic English poet since the age of the Elizabethans did not fit his genius better to a practical stage. One simple answer has already been given, his refusal to study and meet popular demand. Another answer is that he found his true vein, his best medium, in monologue rather than in dialogue. In the dramatic monologue he has few predecessors, shoals of successors, no equals. One of his volumes is called *Dramatic Lyrics*—and that name is emblematic of the character of much of Browning's work—lyric

poetry externalized, impersonalized, dramatized. Oscar Wilde said in his *De Profundis*, "I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made of it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or sonnet." Browning might have reversed that statement: I took the lyric, the most subjective form known to art, and made of it as impersonal a mode of expression as the drama.

Browning's own thoughts are threaded through his poems, but the people of his monologues are not himself, are objective, dramatic. Probably Rabbi Ben Ezra and the old Pope in *The Ring and the Book* utter most compactly more of Browning's philosophy of life than any other characters of his invention. But neither the Jewish Rabbi nor the Roman Catholic Pope is Robert Browning himself, an English non-Anglican Protestant. It is possible, as has been remarked by another, that Browning unconsciously put more of his own personal traits (his reckless courage and his chivalry) into Caponsacchi, the hero-priest of *The Ring and the Book*, than into any other of his characters. But his ideal of poetic creation was the impersonalism of Shakespeare, the dramatic projection of natures and personalities other than his own. Almost truculently, he defied the public to find him, Robert Browning, in his poems. We find this defiance categorically in the poem *House*. Only rarely does he deliberately express himself, his personality, in his poems: as in the Epilogue to *Asolando*; *Prospice*; the exquisite concluding lines of the first book of *The Ring and the Book*, the address to his dead wife, beginning

O lyric Love, half angel and half bird
And all a wonder and a wild desire;

and in the concluding poem of the volume *Men and Women*, the poem addressed to his living wife, *One Word More*, surely one of the devoutest love poems in the language:

There they are, my fifty men and women
Naming me the fifty poems finished!
Take them, Love, the book and me together:
Where the heart lies, let the brain lie also.

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Let me speak this once in my true person,
Not as Lippo, Roland, or Andrea,
Though the fruit of speech be just this sentence:
Pray you look on these my men and women,
Take and keep my fifty poems finished:
Where my heart lies, let my brain lie also!

Add to these things, his first published poem, *Pauline*, and a few of his later poems (notably *La Saisiaz*) and we practically exhaust the personal poems of Browning. The rest, the great mass of them, express frequently passionate convictions and often subtle arguments, but not the personality of Robert Browning. He is a curious combination of intense attachment to ideas and austere detachment from self-revelation. Such, briefly summarized, is his attitude toward his art, an attitude which accentuates his aloofness from his time. Certainly his art is not "Victorian," is distinctly "modern"—twentieth century. One of our "new" American poets (one of the modernists), once said to me, "Browning was the first of us—the first to dramatize a mood."

Finally, there is Browning's attitude toward questions of his day—the problems of the era of reform, the new democracy. He, the most insistent questioner in nineteenth century English poetry, applied few questions to the engrossing matters of political and social reform. He was primarily interested in other things.

Typical Victorian literature was socialized literature, from Carlyle through Kipling. But this dominant note is virtually absent from Browning's poetry. His is an almost unique case of an author, vividly interested in everything about him and yet silent about contemporary actualities. When the creative mood overtook him, he was less respon-

sive to people in their social and political relationships than to people as individuals. Or, as C. H. Herford felicitously states it, "His actual dealings with men and women called out all his genial energies of heart and brain, but—with one momentous exception [meaning, of course, Mrs. Browning]—they did not touch his imagination." His biographer, Mrs. Orr, says: "His politics were, so far as they went, the practical aspect of his religion. Their cardinal doctrine was the liberty of individual growth." That statement, which has the truth of finality, is strikingly illustrated by a comparison of Browning's sonnet *Why I am a Liberal* (published 1885) with several untitled poems by Tennyson (published 1842) on the subject of British liberalism founded in constitutional development. There is one of these stanzas by Tennyson which a pre-eminent student of constitutional law who rose to be President of the United States never wearied of quoting in support of his position as a conservative progressive—believing that it expressed the essence of political wisdom under orderly (not radical) change:

A land of settled government,
A land of just and old renown,
Where Freedom slowly broadens down
From precedent to precedent.

But what devotee of politics, theoretical or practical, would find any pointed political wisdom in Browning's answer to a questionnaire circulated among prominent men of England in 1885, asking why they were Liberals? The answer is not in terms of politics but in terms of God and the Soul of man—the subjects which most occupied his thinking. In a prefatory note to a reprint of *Sordello* in 1863 he had said that "the stress" was "on the incidents in the development of a soul; little else is worth study."

Victorian literature, in general, by no means neglected "soul." But most of it, that was typical, stressed also the

political and social idea: Dickens the Reformer; Carlyle the inquirer into the workings of democracy; Ruskin, with the long shelf of volumes in which he faced about from art to consider questions in economics and social arrangement; Tennyson the inspired interpreter of English liberalism; George Eliot, author of *Felix Holt the Radical*; Charles Kingsley; Charles Reade; Frederick Denison Maurice; and many others, including Mrs. Browning herself.

The contemporary popularity of the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the unpopularity of her husband's poetry throw light on Victorianism and the Brownings. Mrs. Browning was intensely interested in "questions of the day," so excited over political events in Europe in 1859 that she became "alarmingly ill;" so interested, that her death (in 1861) was, it is believed, hastened by the death of Cavour earlier in the month. Her *Aurora Leigh*, *Casa Guidi Windows*, *Poems Before Congress* and *The Cry of the Children* are altogether "contemporary" with political and social reform. Consider, for example, *The Cry of the Children* (published 1841). It is the cry of Dickens for reform, of Ruskin against machinery, of Carlyle against the subjugation of the poor, of Dickens' and Tennyson's sentiment—true Victorian sentiment, which in this hard-boiled twentieth century we have come to call sentimentality. It is typically "Victorian" in both its political-social subject and in its treatment of the subject.

None of her husband's poetry is either. In 1841 (before he was married) he had written *Pippa Passes*, a poem about a little mill girl. But there is nothing in this charming dramatic poem about Pippa's economic subjection. It is about her joy as she wanders singing through the village of Asolo on her one holiday in all the year, and the way her singing reaches the hearts, the "souls" of a number of different people, each

in a crisis, and turns the destiny of each. It was a new poetic form—not quite dramatic, not quite lyric, a blend of the two—not quite like anything that had been written before, either in matter or manner. It was not “obvious” to people in 1841. But *The Cry of the Children* by Mrs. Browning was entirely obvious to all who were thinking about industrial reforms. It said precisely what many were thinking. Mrs. Browning did not write to “hit the popular taste” any more than did Carlyle. But she was a product of the era which Carlyle, and after him Ruskin, almost created. Robert Browning, “writing from himself and to himself” was not quite of that era. So in 1844–1860 Mrs. Browning was a famous poet, mentioned for the laureateship after the death of Wordsworth in 1850, while Robert Browning was her husband—who also wrote verses. Like nearly everybody else he thought her a better poet than himself—and rejoiced with loving joy.

About the time that Tennyson was publishing his *Maud* and Robert Browning was publishing his *Men and Women*, Mrs. Browning was getting *Aurora Leigh* ready for publication. *Maud* and *Aurora Leigh* were instantaneous successes—*Aurora Leigh* ran through three editions in the first year of its publication. *Men and Women* had to wait a long time for general recognition. And, again, Browning was happy over his wife’s triumph, and undismayed by comparative neglect of his own book.

Such love as Browning’s for his wife is necessarily “blind.” He could not see, and we are glad he could not see, that *Men and Women* was an immeasurably superior poetic performance to *Aurora Leigh*. It is significant that twelve years before Mrs. Browning wrote *Aurora Leigh* she had dimly conceived it as a novel in verse, and Victorian insipidity is seldom so insipid as when it takes the form of a verse novelette.

Perhaps under her husband's influence, Mrs. Browning struck a deeper note than she had originally intended. One of the ardent commentators sees in *Aurora Leigh* "a great dramatic poem" and "a philosophical commentary on art and life" and also "a social treatise." But even this enthusiast says that "the narrative, it must be confessed, is fantastic and unreal."

Another, and a more fastidious critic, none other than Edward Fitzgerald, translator-creator of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, had a different opinion of the poem. In a private letter, not intended for publication, but inadvertently included in Aldis Wright's *Life and Letters of Edward Fitzgerald* (an oversight which Wright subsequently regretted), Fitzgerald had written (as, of course, he should not have written even to a confidential friend about the death of any woman—much less so great and noble a woman as Mrs. Browning): "Mrs. Browning's death is rather a relief to me, I must say; no more Aurora Leighs, thank God!" This book was published in 1889, the last year on earth of the widowed Robert Browning, who had remained a widower for nearly thirty years, and Browning dipped into the book, with the result that he wrote a sonnet, one of his last compositions, which appeared in a periodical. Browning regretted his burst of anger, and withheld the sonnet from his last published volume, *Asolando*, issued on the day of his death, December 12, 1889. But some present-day complete editions of Browning's works include the sonnet, and I offer no apology for inserting what the poet had suppressed, for it reveals some characteristics of Browning—his devotion to his dead wife, and his flaming spirit unquenched by his seventy-seven years. In *The Ring and the Book* Browning had commended "healthy rage," and now his love for his dead wife seemed to make his rage against Fitzgerald

"healthy" and righteous; and doubtless his love made him still believe that *Aurora Leigh* was a great poem. Here is the sonnet:

TO EDWARD FITZGERALD.

I chanced upon a new book yesterday;
I opened it; and where my finger lay,
'Twixt page and uncut page, these words I read,—
Some six or seven, at most,—and learned thereby
That you, Fitzgerald, whom by ear and eye
She never knew, thanked God my wife was dead.
Ay, dead, and were yourself alive, good Fitz,
How to return you thanks would task my wits.
Kicking you seems the common lot of curs,
While more appropriate greeting lends you grace;
Surely, to spit there glorifies your face,—
Spitting,—from lips once sanctified by hers.

July 8, 1889.

Even more than I anticipated at the outset, this talk on "Browning and the Victorian Age" is remindful of the chapter on snakes in the *Natural History of Iceland*. In all except brevity it is like that chapter. In talking about Browning and the Victorian Age I have been chiefly occupied with statements of what is *non-Victorian* in the poetry of Browning. Yet, as Percy Hutchison says: "Robert Browning, while in small degree reflecting the purely social aspect of his time and thereby differing essentially from Tennyson, 'dates' even more indelibly than does Tennyson. For the very fount of Browning's compositions was the intellectual rebellion, the aroused intellectual curiosity of his day." The new science and a new philosophy springing out of the new science led some Victorians to doubt and despair, but led Browning to a fresh fervent reaffirmation of God, the Immortality of the Soul, the Freedom of the Will, and an optimism that is gorgeous. Much that was bravest and best in the mental life of the Victorians got its boldest and most dynamic expression in Browning's poetry. Of all Victorians he was the bonniest fighter and certainly the greatest poet:

facing the spiritual problems of the Victorian era, and either arguing them out with tenacious logic, or fighting out the issue with the faith and courage of Paul who met the wild beasts at Ephesus. But this Victorian aspect of Browning's optimism, and this optimistic aspect of Browning's Victorianism must be discussed later. Meanwhile there shall be an interlude, a chapter on Browning's Art.